

Knowing God in the Word

That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. Philippians 3:10.

It Just Happened

Ruth 2:1-13

1. There was a relative of Naomi's husband, a man of great wealth, of the family of Elimelech. His name was Boaz.

We take up the second chapter as the barley harvest in Bethlehem is beginning. Now we are introduced to a new character who will have an important role in the remainder of our story. This man is a relative of Naomi's husband. It is Naomi's husband's family that has lost their inheritance and their family line by the misfortune of Elimelech in Moab, for in the Hebrew society as God had set it up, their family lines were reckoned through the male. Therefore, Boaz is part of the family that should be concerned about this loss, and whom God would expect to help recover it according to the law.

The man is described as a man of great wealth, which he was. He was rich in goods, as well as in other more important things, including character, as we will see. The man's name is Boaz, which means "Fleetness." This is an appropriate name for him in this story, for he is going to be the one to bring God's swift blessings upon both Ruth and Naomi.

*2. So Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, "Please let me go to the field, and glean heads of grain after him in whose sight I may find favor."
And she said to her, "Go, my daughter."*

Having come to the land of Israel at last, Naomi and Ruth must turn their thoughts towards how they are to support themselves. This was not as easy a matter as those of us living in this society might think. Women at that time were always under the protection of a man and his family. They could work, but only for the family they were connected to, whether it was that of their fathers or that of their husbands. Yet a woman alone was in deep trouble. She could not get a job, for no one would hire a woman alone. Without a husband or father, she had no real way of making a living. She could try to produce something she could sell, but she would have to do this on her own, as no one would help her do it. Or she could become a prostitute, for that was an occupation open to a woman alone. The only other option she would have would be to become a beggar. This was the sad reality of widowhood in Israel.

Yet the Lord was not without compassion on those in Israel who were in dire straits. In Leviticus 19:9-10, He created a provision whereby the impoverished could at least collect some food to live on.

9. 'When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. 10. And you shall not glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather every grape of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I am the LORD your God.

Therefore, the LORD made this provision for the poor of the land. They could collect food after the gleaners when there was a harvest, and gather from the corners of the fields. In this way, they could fend off starvation.

Now as I said, Ruth and Naomi have arrived in Judah, and now they must take thought for how they are to survive. Ruth, being younger and stronger than her mother-in-law, wants to help provide for her, and so industriously takes it upon herself to figure out something to do to provide for both of them. Yet Ruth was a foreigner from Moab, and did not know all the customs of Israel and provisions of the law for the aid of the poor. Yet we can be sure she sought these things out. She probably questioned Naomi closely as to what options might be open in Israel for people in their desperate situation. So from her mother-in-law, no doubt, she learns of this provision for the poor at harvest time. Ruth immediately takes hold of this idea. Here is something legal and upright that she can do to help provide for herself and Naomi.

So Ruth brings her determination before Naomi. She will go into the harvest fields, and glean in the field of whoever might show her favor. She does not know who will be willing to do this, but she is optimistic that someone will, and that in this way she will be able to provide for the two of them. Naomi can think of no better idea, and so blesses the plan of her daughter-in-law.

The word Ruth uses for favor is the Hebrew word *chen*, which means “grace.” She is hoping that someone will see her, and will show undeserved love and favor towards her. This was be grace, for she would be taking grain from someone when she had not helped to plant or till it, and her gathering would not benefit the owner of the grain whatsoever. Moreover, the landowners would have even less reason to show favor to her since she was a foreigner, a widow, and impoverished. Yet she was the very kind of person for whom the LORD had established this rule, and one who feared the LORD should understand that and allow her to glean.

3. Then she left, and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers. And she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech.

So Ruth makes no delay. The difficulty of the job or the possibility of failure does not daunt her. She goes out as she planned, and chooses a field to glean in after the reapers. She picks this field at random, and yet it just happens to be the part of the field belonging to Boaz of the family of Elimelech, her father-in-law.

Yet, Ruth “happened” to come to this particular field. In Hebrew, this is “her chance chanced.” That is, by natural eyesight, this would appear to be a fortunate coincidence. However, we do not believe that this was just a case of happenstance, fortune, or luck. Behind the scenes of this story, God is working, and this was no coincidence after all. He had not forgotten Naomi, as she thought. He had not ignored the *metanoia* attitude that Ruth had shown, nor the love she had for her mother-in-law, nor her pledge to place herself under the God of Naomi. He has seen all this, and now He guides things as only He can, seeing to it that she “happens” to come to the field of Boaz, the very one who could redeem her. She had left the land of “From a Father,” and had come to the land of Israel to a Father, and One Who will show her that He is a caring Father, and that He will care for all those who put their trust in Him.

We know that we are not part of Israel, and that God has not made a covenant with us to promise to care for us. Yet how often do things just seem to “happen” right for God’s will to be brought about even today! Even in our own lives there are coincidences and circumstantial events that just seem to just “happen” the way they do. Yet could it be that God is still working behind the scenes in His grace? Could it be that some of these things that just seem to “happen” are in fact Him working to watch out for those He loves and to bring about His will? We believe that it still is the case that many of the things that just seem to “happen” the way they do are in fact orchestrated to bring about what He wills and to demonstrate the glories of His grace.

4. Now behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem, and said to the reapers, “The LORD be with you!” And they answered him, “The LORD bless you!”

Now she is allowed to continue her work by the servants of Boaz, showing that this man at least in Israel had instructed his employees to allow the poor to glean from his fields in the manner prescribed

in the law. This shows that he was a man who cared about God's law. So she works in the field as the morning continues, and is there when Boaz arrives from Bethlehem.

We might wonder why Boaz was not there for the gleaning already? To understand this, we need to know the way people customarily lived at that time. Most of the Israelites were farmers, and made their living by working the fields. However, they did not live in their fields, but rather in the cities and towns near their fields. They would stay in the town overnight, and then go out to their fields to work during the day. This is what Boaz is doing here.

So Boaz arrives, and we see that he greets his servants the reapers in the name of the LORD. Apparently, Boaz was a man who did not keep quiet about his faith in the true God. He spoke of the LORD to all those employed by him. And from their answer, we can see that they returned the blessing in the name of the LORD. Either his attitude had rubbed off on those employed by him, or else he had employed men who shared his convictions regarding the LORD. We do not know exactly when this was, so we do not know what things were like in Bethlehem. It may be that all those in this city generally were interested in and serious about the LORD at this time. Yet judging from the condition of Israel described in the book of Judges about this time period, it is unlikely that this was always the case. Even in Israel, not all men were dedicated to the LORD. Boaz simply has employed this kind of men.

5. Then Boaz said to his servant who was in charge of the reapers, "Whose young woman is this?"

Boaz had been surveying the work as he traveled out to meet the reapers, and he noticed Ruth. She was obviously someone who would draw attention. No doubt she did not look like one from Judah, and maybe was even noticeably different from an Israelite. We do not know exactly how different the Moabites looked from the Israelites, so we cannot say for certain if her nationality was obvious. She may well have been also a striking young woman in appearance, as her name suggests, and Boaz doubtlessly noticed this as well.

So he speaks to the servant in charge of the reapers. We would call this the foreman today. He asks him whose young woman this is? He does not recognize her, and in a small town like Bethlehem, that is an unusual thing. She is obviously not just passing through town, since she is out in the fields gleaning. Who then is she? To whom does she belong? For as we said, the thought of a young woman alone in the world without belonging to some family unit was unthinkable at this time. Boaz wonders what family it is that she belongs to.

6. So the servant who was in charge of the reapers answered and said, "It is the young Moabite woman who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab."

The servant replies and informs Boaz that this is the young Moabite woman who came back with Naomi from Moab. Bethlehem was a small town, and by this time everyone in town would have known the story of Naomi's return, and of the Moabite daughter-in-law who had come back with her, though not everyone in town might yet have met the two of them. Boaz has heard the story, though this is the first he has seen of the young woman Ruth. No doubt he knew Naomi from before her family's departure.

7. And she said, 'Please let me glean and gather after the reapers among the sheaves.' So she came and has continued from morning until now, though she rested a little in the house."

The foreman tells Boaz how she came there and how politely she asked to glean there. Her request to glean among the sheaves after the reapers was again according to Leviticus 19:9-10, and was all in accordance with the law. Boaz is a law-keeping man and his foreman knows it, so of course he had not refused her request. Yet he has watched her work among his other duties, and he reports to Boaz how hardworking she has been, only taking one short break from her labors in the field.

8. Then Boaz said to Ruth, "You will listen, my daughter, will you not? Do not go to glean in another field, nor go from here, but stay close by my young women."

Boaz is impressed by this young woman and the report he has received of her. Therefore he determines to care for her. He goes to Ruth and speaks to her. He refers to her as a daughter, which probably gives us an idea of their relative ages. Ruth was still a young woman, but Boaz was no longer a young man, though we do not know that he was exactly old, either. A man might commonly have children at sixteen or so, so this does not have to imply quite as many years as it would likely do today. At any rate, Boaz advises her not to go from his field to another, but rather to stay in his field and close by his female servants.

This was a generous offer indeed, for of course Boaz was profiting from the work of his own young women, who were working for him and supporting his business endeavors by doing so. Ruth, however, was only gathering grain to live on for herself and her mother-in-law, so Boaz had no incentive to do anything for her more than what the law required. Certainly allowing her to join his own female servants was a gracious act on his part.

9. Let your eyes be on the field which they reap, and go after them. Have I not commanded the young men not to touch you? And when you are thirsty, go to the vessels and drink from what the young men have drawn."

Boaz makes further provisions for her. She is to follow his young women as they work, and go after them. He assures her that he has already commanded his own young men not to do anything to hinder her, so as long as she is in his fields she will come to no harm. He also sees to it she will not thirst while working in his field, giving her permission to drink from the water drawn by his young men for the workers. Again, this was above and beyond what the law commanded, and was a very gracious act on the part of Boaz.

10. So she fell on her face, bowed down to the ground, and said to him, "Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?"

Ruth falls on her face and bows down to the ground before Boaz. This would seem rather bizarre behavior to us, but would not at all have seemed strange in that oriental culture. Moreover, we might think this implies worship, but it does not. Ruth is showing humility and gratitude both by this bowing.

Ruth now speaks and tells Boaz that she does not understand why he would show her such favor, since she is a foreigner. The word Ruth uses here, "favor," is the Hebrew word for "grace," *chen*. Ruth knows that Boaz has dealt with her with a love and favor she does not deserve. This is what she told her mother-in-law Naomi she hoped to find, and now she has found a man of grace in Boaz. However, she does not understand why he has been so kind and gracious to her.

At that time, foreigners were generally mistrusted and hated. The people of your community whom you knew and who grew up with you worked together with you towards the mutual goal of living and supporting yourselves through life. Anyone not of your family, clan, people, or nation was not there to help you, and so aroused suspicion. You could see no benefit that you could receive from such a person, and who knows but that this person would not try to steal from you what you have? And so, it was a dangerous and unpopular thing at the time to be a foreigner in a strange land.

Ruth well knew how strangers were treated in a land not their own. She had probably seen her Israelite husband and brother-in-law treated in just that way back in the land of Moab. Therefore, the generosity of Boaz towards her, a foreigner, impresses her most strongly. Of course, she might not have been aware of the LORD's commands towards Israel regarding foreigners in Exodus 22:21, "**You shall neither mistreat a stranger nor oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.**"

11. And Boaz answered and said to her, "It has been fully reported to me, all that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband, and how you have left your father and your mother and the land of your birth, and have come to a people whom you did not know before.

Boaz was a Godly man, and doubtless knew and remembered Jehovah's command regarding strangers in Exodus. However, it is not this that he references to Ruth as the reason for his kindness towards her. Instead, he tells her that he has received a good report of her. He has heard of her self-sacrificing love for her mother-in-law since her husband's death. It has even driven her to leave her own mother and homeland to come to what was to her the foreign land of Israel. This was a gracious and loving thing to do, and Boaz respected that, being that kind of man himself.

So Ruth gives us an example of the truth that a good reputation is a valuable thing indeed. It would be good for believing young people who themselves seek a marriage partner to keep these things in mind. If you want to find a kind, loving, and gracious marriage partner, an important first step is becoming that kind of person yourself. The reputation that precedes you from this kind of behavior can do much.

12. The LORD repay your work, and a full reward be given you by the LORD God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge."

He wishes the LORD's blessings upon her, and that He will repay her for her work and give her a full reward. Understand that at that time, a full reward would have been nothing short of a husband and family for herself. So Boaz desires that the LORD will give her this reward, for he knows that she has now put herself under His care. He uses the figure of a mother bird who keeps her children under her wings, picturing Ruth huddled under the LORD's wings in that way.

The figure of the LORD as a mother bird might seem startling to some, for it means that the LORD is being pictured as a female, and we usually think of the LORD as a male. I suppose we have good reason for this, both from the male pronouns used when speaking of Him in the Bible, and from the Lord Jesus Christ, Who of course was male. However, remember that God in His absolute form is neither male nor female. Moreover, He is the Creator both of men and women, and He embodies perfectly the very best aspects both of manhood and womanhood, both of motherhood and of fatherhood. So we should not be surprised by such a figure. In this case, a mother bird illustrates the LORD well in a way a father bird could not.

13. Then she said, "Let me find favor in your sight, my lord; for you have comforted me, and have spoken kindly to your maidservant, though I am not like one of your maidservants."

Ruth acknowledges the grace of Boaz. What else can she do? She has nothing she can offer in repayment for his kindness, for she has nothing at all. In this, Ruth is much like all of us before the love and favor of God. We likewise can do nothing to repay our Savior for all His grace. All we can do is what Ruth does here: acknowledge it, and thank Him for it.

Ruth again is impressed because he has showed her such grace, though she is not like one of his maidservants. This was true in two ways: one, because she was not one of his maidservants, but just a poor person getting food for herself from his field, and secondly because she was a foreigner.

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